

A CLOSER LOOK

Story by Ron Wilson



Red fox pup

CRAIG BIRLE

Blind Beginning

Red fox kits are born sightless, blind to the rolling prairie, cattail-ringed sloughs and cultivated country that surrounds the remodeled badger hole that is temporarily home.

Born in spring, fox pups remain underground the first four or five weeks before emerging cover-photo cute – a characteristic contrived in the human brain, but lost on small mammals and nesting upland birds and waterfowl that become prey once the canines mature and hone hunting skills.

Adult foxes in North Dakota mate in January or February, with the male and female staying together at least during breeding and rearing of young. At first, both adults bring food underground to den-bound pups. As the new additions mature – average litter size is five to six animals – food is dropped in the den's vicinity, forcing the pups to learn to fend for themselves.

If the den is disturbed during this time of growing and learning, young are moved to another site. Foxes, it turns out, have several dens for just such emergencies.

By fall, young leave the adults and go through winter on their own, find a mate and raise their own young the following spring. It's a cycle seemingly without pause for an animal that inhabits virtually all types of habitats in North Dakota.

The red fox is an opportunistic hunter, feeding on whatever is available. Research has shown that this animal will eat most anything from small mammals, to game birds, to carrion, to fruits and insects. Most of the hunting takes place under the cover of darkness and in all kinds of weather, including the dead of winter, as the red fox does not hibernate.

Follow the fresh tracks of a red fox on the prowl and you'll notice something. This canine leaves an orderly trail, with prints placed nearly in a straight line like a house cat. Trails left by domestic dogs, on the other hand, are more laissez-faire – wandering here and there – which says something about the tame animal's lack of fear and little concern for catching prey since food is handed out at home.

Unlike coyotes, which will hunt in packs, the red fox is a solitary hunter. It has a fixed rate of consumption, biologists tell us, eating about 1 pound of food per day. If more prey is killed than can be eaten in one day, the fox will bury it for later, proving its foresight for survival is better than its eyesight at birth.

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